

Impacts of Recent Education Reforms in Japan: Voices from Junior High Schools in Japan

Riho Sakurai

Hiroshima University, Japan

Abstract

Numerous education policies, which are not necessarily oriented in the same direction, have been implemented over the last few decades in Japan. Two of these seemingly opposing policies are Yutori-Kyouiku and Datsu-Yutori Kyouiku. However, how have these policies perceived on the ground? Are they understood correctly? This paper, while exploring voices from Japanese public schools, describes perceptions of these education policies by junior high school principals. The paper concludes that while some policies have been well-received, teachers have not yet been informed as to what these policies are based on, how they are formed, etc., in the larger educational framework. It also suggests that smoothing the channels between policy makers and teachers at the local level by clarifying policy objectives, implications and plausible effects would help enable not only to smooth policy dissemination but also to understand real needs from the local school level, thereby advancing education policy as a whole.

Introduction

Education has long been one of the most controversial issues in Japan. Issues of skyrocketing numbers of “futoukou” (students who are unable to attend school), an increased incidence of bullying at school, and an increasing number of students with developmental problems are examples of the countless problems observed at Japanese schools. Yet, drastic neoliberal policy changes partially known as Yutori-Kyouiku (a less study-focused policy) and Datsu-Yutori or counter-yutori policy (re-introduction of a more study-oriented policy) have attracted public attention since these two seemingly opposite academic policies were implemented over a span of 10-15 years, specifically reflecting the deteriorating results revealed in the PISA 2003 tests. But where are the voices of school teachers in this issue? How do they view these national policy changes? This paper draws on the reactions of lower-secondary school teachers to such policy changes and uncovers how these changes have either been received positively or have been deemed “egregious.” This paper first gives a background on Japanese education and its policy reforms; then, it introduces the local (municipal) city where this study was implemented. Finally, results of the study are presented with some concluding remarks.

Public education and three waves of education reform in Japan

Japan has a long history of compulsory schooling starting as early as 1886, fourteen years after the issuance of the 1872 Education Code (the first comprehensive plan for mass schooling) by the Meiji government. At this time moral education, known as Shushin, or the teaching of good virtue, was a major subject taught at school, and the 1890's *Imperial Rescript on Education* became the basis of promulgation of moral education through public education (Hoffman, 1999). This Rescript, composed of 315 Japanese writing symbols, is focused on the relationship between “ruler and subjects” or the “Imperial Throne” (Khan, 1997, p.71). In addition, the *Imperial Rescript on Education* explicitly promotes piety, loyalty, friendship, benevolence, sincerity, prosperity, respect, courage and modesty together with obedience, docility, and conformity. Submission of children to parents and teachers, nation, and emperor were strongly recommended (Hoffman, 1999). To put it a different way, instilling discipline and good virtue for the country so that the country can modernize through economic development was the objective of this early schooling policy in Japan (ibid.). Rappleye (2011) considered this education policy as “‘catching-up’ with advanced Western industrialized societies” (p.70). Students were required to remember the Rescript letter by heart, and by this way, the concept of nationalism, which was encapsulated under the name Shushin spirit, became rooted in each student. There were six original subjects taught in the 1880s: Shushin, reading, writing, Japanese calligraphy, mathematics and physical education. As of 1910, more than 98% of primary school-aged children attended four year compulsory primary school (MEXT); universal compulsory schooling had almost been attained by 1910, which is far earlier than in Western countries.

During the political subjugation period during the Second World War and its aftermath (1937-1955)¹, Shushin, the principle subject that had been taught at school, was discarded. The Emperor-centric concept, the absolute obedience to teachers and parents, and the disregard for women were swept away. In 1947, following the end of the Second World War, a new law, the Fundamental Law of Education (FLE), was established for which the central philosophy was to confirm equal rights to education and to democratize the country with more equal systems, including co-educational secondary schools (Rappleye, 2011). The Preamble of FLE affirmed individual dignity and an “endeavor to bring up people who love truth and peace” as well as equal opportunities for education without any discrimination against race, creed, sex, social status, economic position or family origin (FLE, 1947). Therefore, the philosophy of an “equal opportunity to everyone” has served as the fundamental basis of schooling policy in Japan after the establishment of post-war education (Yano, 2013).

¹ According to Rappleye and Kariya (2011), there are three major education reform periods: the first one during the early Meiji period (1868-1890), the second one during the Second World War and its aftermath (1937-1955), and the third one during Prime Minister Nakasone's Ad Hoc council for Education (1983-1987).

In terms of subjects taught at school, pre-war worship of the Emperor taught through Shushin was replaced with an alternative “realm,” called Dohtoku. Dohtoku borrowed the basic philosophy of “self-sacrifice for the good of others” or “conformity over individuality”² derived from Confucianism, and was established in 1958 when Japanese policy makers searched for another close-fitting form of moral education while citing democratic aspects of the US education system. Khan (1997) described the objectives of Dohtoku as “self-awareness and the development of moral thinking” (p. 105). Preserving cultural concepts such as “self-awareness,” “self-sacrifice for the good of others,” and “conformity over individuality,” yet accepting greater gender equality, shows how a form of cultural nationalism³ was preserved in a suitable form while at the same time adapting to a more internationally-acceptable standard. FLE (1947) also provided new teaching guidelines (1951) for primary schools that included eight subjects—Japanese, mathematics, social studies, science, music, art, home economics, and physical education—almost the same subjects as taught now. In a similar vein, local boards of education were established to maintain a decentralized education system to minimize political influences from central or local authorities (Tokunaga, 2012).

The third and perhaps most controversial educational reform series was initiated in the early 1980s. Two large influences, one from school and one from society, too much emphasis on exams, which has been said to trigger the social problem of *Exam Hell*, and the other, deregulation, marketization, and privatization waves based on neoliberal philosophies, came to affect the field of public education (Yano, 2013; Sakurai, 2011). In 1983’s Central Council of Education, the major objectives of education shifted from *Kansei-kyouiku*, a policy asserting that all necessary knowledge and skills should be taught at school, to *Shogai-gakushu*, a lifelong learning approach in which school education provides the *basis* of such a learning process through which Jiko-kyouiku-ryoku, an individual’s own ability to educate him/her self, should be nurtured (Tokunaga, 2012, *emphasis* added). In 1984, the Ad Hoc Council on Education was launched under Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone, a friend of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, all of whom pushed neoliberal policies beginning in the 1980s. The Council set the agenda that was followed during the reforms in the 1990s.

The Council has had immense influence. For instance, the Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture (hereinafter, MEXT), revised its teaching guidelines both in 1989 and 1998, and the new teaching guidelines were implemented in 1992 and 2002, respectively. Due to a philosophy of limiting the functions of school, the revision in 1998 brought a drastic 30% reduction in teaching content while adding three class hours of *sougou-gakushu* or integrated learning. Following the 1998 revision, in 2002 new textbooks

² This attitude, “conformity over individuality” and “self-sacrifice for the good of others” coming from the concept of Confucianism as well as rice-paddy culture which requires cooperation among neighboring people. This concept seems to thrive in the spirit of current education and society in Japan.

³ This paper utilizes the concept of nationalism as “a psychological phenomenon by which individuals define themselves as members of the group” (Mito, 2006, p.3).

that reflected this reduction in study content were disseminated to students. This policy has often been referred to as “Yutori” policy, or relaxed education policy, highlighting the reduction in content. However, due to the shock of the poor PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) results in 2003, the government quickly moved back to the former learning standards by increasing the number of study hours (c.f. 1015 hours for junior high school). Consequently, by 2008, the study content had returned to the same level as it was in 1989. Furthermore, for the first time in nearly half a century, the government *reintroduced* a national standardized achievement test in 2007 (Tokunaga, 2012). This reversal is often referred to as “Datsu-Yutori,” or counter-relaxed education policy.

A wave of delegation has led to revisions to the Fundamental Law of Education in 2006. In 2006, FLE was revised for the first time in 59 years. Unlike Mexico, for example, which has changed its legislation many times, Japan has rarely changed its legal framework, so the revision provoked a myriad of controversies. A major controversy resulted from its emphasis on “tradition,” “discipline,” “morality,” and most of all, “patriotism” or “love of nation,” all of which seem reminiscent of the 1890’s *Imperial Rescript on Education*. Takayama (2011) termed this “love of nation” or fortifying national identity shift as “intensification of control (by the government) over citizens” and argues that its goal is to “consolidate a safety net among citizens under the name of Aikokushin or love of nation” (p.256). Similarly, Yano (2013) argues that the revision in 2006 more or less reflected the cumulative results of deregulation and the market-oriented economy that began in the 1980s. Takayama adds that the government promoted cultural nationalism by enforcing patriotic propaganda to eradicate anxiety in society (ibid). However, this is something that occurred at the policy-making level. How have these ever-changing national policies been perceived on the ground? The author conducted a series of interviews to examine the response to these policies among educators at local schools in Japan.

Research site and methods

The author implemented this study in city X. City X is a politically-designated city (or *seirei-shitei-toshi*) with a population of 1.2 million and is the 10th largest city in Japan. Currently, Japan has twenty *seirei-shitei-toshi*, the smallest one having a population of over 0.7 million. *Seirei-shitei-toshi* implies that it has the function and nature of a city, including a population with some degree of demographic diversity,⁴ with people from

⁴ Japan has 47 prefectures with 47 prefectural capitals. However, while some prefectural capitals correspond to the prefecture’s *seirei-shitei-toshi*, other prefectures have more than one *seirei-shitei-toshi*, such as Kanagawa prefecture, in which both Yokohama-city and Kawasaki-city are *seirei-shitei-toshi*. By contrast, sometimes even the prefectural capital is not designated as “*seirei-shitei-toshi*” (c.f. Shimane prefecture) due to limited population size and other reasons. Currently, one in five people live in *seirei-shitei-toshi*.

differing backgrounds who are expected to be representative of a certain area of the country. The other essential element of seirei-shitei-toshi is that the city has a stand-alone government that functions independently from the prefectural government, specifically with regard to finance and personnel. As a seirei-shitei-toshi, therefore, City X has its own education committee board from which school personnel and budget are allocated. Since the major purpose of this study is to explore voices from local public schools, selecting schools that are located in a seirei-shitei-toshi shall provide a representative sample.

Semi-structural hour-long interviews were conducted with the principals of five different junior high schools in city X out of the city's 64 schools. While the number of schools visited is limited, each interview lasted about two hours, and the author was previously acquainted with these principals for several years and had previously visited each school to conduct student surveys on more than one occasion prior to this study. This is an important consideration because Japanese individuals are sometimes reserved about sharing their opinion with someone with whom they are not well acquainted. Because the school day is tightly scheduled, allowing an outsider to conduct a survey also suggests a level of trust between the school and the researcher. Therefore, while the number of visited schools is small, it is likely to reflect views of local educators more honestly than if a larger number of schools were included with the goal only of increasing the sample size. The schools were also selected to represent the city's range of urban, suburban, and rural regions in City X.

Demographic questions included the following: (1) how did you decide to be a school teacher, especially a junior high school teacher? (2) Years worked and number of schools worked at, and (3) length of time as a principal. Other details of the school principal profiles and responses are provided in Table 1.

As shown in Table 1, except for one principal who had previously worked on the administrative staff at the city district center for promotion of physical education, all of the principals began their careers as teachers. All of them became vice principals (Kyotou) before becoming Kochou or principals. All principals have served as teachers for between 34 to 37 years, and they have taught at three to six different schools. The gender imbalance (male principals outnumbering female principals) also illustrates the representative demographic characteristics of junior high school principals in Japan. All of the principals answered that the reason why they became teachers was due to the benevolent impact by the teachers they had met when they were children; one principal quoted William Ward (1921-1994) to indicate the ideal picture of teachers;

The mediocre teacher tells.

The good teacher explains.

The superior teacher demonstrates.

But the great teacher inspires.

This illustrates that educators have enormous influence and that their mentors have inspired these principals to follow the same track.

Table 1. List of principals interviewed

	Principals				
Questions asked	A) junior high school	B) junior high school	C) junior high school	D) junior high school	E) junior high school
Years worked as a teacher	34 years	37 years	34 years	34 years	37 years
Number of schools worked at	5 schools (but worked at one school more than once)	4 schools	3 schools	4 schools (but worked at one school more than once)	5 schools (but worked at one school more than once)
Principal since	April 2011	April 2011	April 2011	April 2011	April 2011
Current school size (as of May 1 st , 2015)	684 students (located in the central downtown area)	633 students (located in a former discriminated area)	617 students (located in a somewhat remote area)	714 students (located within the city but not in the downtown area)	89 students (located in a remote mountainous area)
Reasons to be a teacher at junior high school	(1) Would like to make students feel happy when they understand the study subject. (2) Influence from the teacher at primary school (3) Does not feel good at other competitive company	(1) Influence from extra-curricular club teacher (2) Thought it a great occupation to influence adolescent students	(1) Eldest brother, who is more than 10 years older, was a teacher (2) Lived alone in the high school time and club teacher was great	(1) Influence from the teacher at junior high school (2) Thought that she would like to always stay with children of junior high school age	(1) Very strong influence from a teacher
Professional experiences before being a principal	N/A	Yes, worked for four years at the city center for P.E. promotion	N/A	N/A	N/A
Gender	M	M	M	F	M

Results—Responses from the principals

At each school, after the demographic questions listed in Table 1 were answered, a semi-structured interview was conducted whereby the researcher first presented the following list of questions. Each principal responded orally to each item in any order, but all principals responded very quickly to questions (4) and (5) and then slowly and deliberately to questions (1) (2) and (3).

List of questions asked:

Please share your opinions

- (1) How did deregulation policies, such as the Yutori education policy, affect your students and teachers?
- (2) How did Datsu-Yutori education policy affect your students and teachers?
- (3) How do you think the revision of FLE has affected your school, specifically Kokoro-no-note?
- (4) Please share your opinion on the two-semester system introduced in city X in 2007.
- (5) Please share your opinion on the school choice policy introduced in city X in 2005.

Questions (4) and (5) are related regarding the education system. The school choice system and the two-semester system were products of deregulation and decentralization under the national government. The City X education committee started the school choice system in 2005 and the two-semester system in 2007 under the strong initiative of city mayor Y, who is often regarded as a left-wing politician and who served one of the national congress members before his appointment as mayor in 1999. He served as mayor of City X from 1999-2011.

For both questions (4) and (5), the principals were largely opposed to the systems. They were not enthusiastic about the two-semester system because, according to them, the original purpose of the two-semester system was to reduce the burden of exams and reduce the number of texts, which matches the objectives of the Yutori-education policy. However, they found that the two-semester system was not realistic, as students sometimes completely forget what they had learned in the first semester since the term-end exam does not occur until after summer vacation. Another principal replied that the two-semester system would have worked well if all societal systems operated on a two-semester system, which is not the case in Japan.

In the same vein, negative opinions were aired for the school choice system. There were numerous reasons for this. First, school choice produces students who lack attachment to the community in which they live (response by three principals). Second, there is a concern that the school choice system might lead to the League Table system in England, resulting in rich areas on the one hand and impoverished areas on the other hand, thereby exacerbating inequality across this social divide. Third, from a more logistical standpoint, two principals responded that schools cannot guarantee the necessary number

of full-time teachers since students often use the school choice system as a backup in case they fail in the entrance exam for private junior high schools. Other negative reasons given are that in case of emergency, students from remote areas might face different situations that are difficult to support, and PTA roles are challenging for parents of students from remote areas since they may need to come to school often. By contrast, one positive response on which three principals agreed was that if a student has experienced a problem such as bullying at a previous school, this system helps such students to resume school in a new environment where other students are unaware of his/her prior difficulties.

Originally, the propaganda brochure for school choice distributed by City X assured parents that it would help students to be more interested in school; for example, a student who favors basketball can choose a school that has a strong basketball club team (X city brochure, 2015). However, school choice was not a popular system among the principals interviewed at this time. This result is in contrast with a study by Oshio et al. (2010) who explored a Cabinet Office survey that analyzed 2000 parents about their children's school choice. Oshio (2010) found that parents with higher education level, occupational status, and income are likely to give positive responses regarding the school choice system. Unfortunately, this outcome matches the concerns of one principal who argued that the system would promote inequality.

While myriad points of debate have arisen following the revision of FLE in 2006, one striking aspect is in the dynamics of fortifying national identity of Aikokushin or “love of nation” through education, by making Kokoro-no-note the workbook of moral education. When asked about this note, all principals gave negative responses explaining that Kokoro-no-note is quite difficult to use. Takeuchi (2006) explains that the moral education workbook, Kokoro-no-note, illustrates the image of ideal Japanese citizens. Following this approach to its logical conclusion, Takeuchi warns that “students therefore become loyal and submissive citizens” by excluding minorities (p. 20).

It would be worthwhile to note that while both Yutori-Kyouiku and Datsu-Yutori Kyouiku policy were the products of 1980s deregulation and decentralization,⁵ each of the principals interpreted these terms in a narrower sense, such as Yutori as “the reduction of study material 30%,” and Datsu-Yutori as “increasing the subject study contents to the former or 1989 level.” Frequent answers included the following:

- “We didn’t know what to do in the Sougou-gakushu (integrated study) class under the Yutori policy, although X-city-styled subject—language & mathematics application class can fill up to two hours of Sougou-gakushu hours.”
- “Teachers at our school do not want to be given every single choice on their shoulders, especially given a new subject.”
- “New textbooks distributed to students in 2002 and beyond were fairly easy with completely limited vocabulary, for instance, in English class. However, unless high

⁵ Ad Hoc Council on Education, launched under Prime Minister Nakasone was formed in 1984-1987 and set the agenda for the 1990s.

school exam content shall change, policy of Yutori won't have any good effects since we still have to prepare students for the entrance exams.”

- “Students who utilized textbooks from 2002 onward are referred to as ‘Yutori-sedai’ or ‘Yutori-generation,’ with negative connotation. Thus, these students seem to have lower self-esteem.”
- “Teachers’ workload became doubled both at Yutori policy, and at Datsu-Yutori policy since they have to prepare for the class that met new curricula.”
- “After Yutori and Datsu-Yutori, students became busier since yearly class hours increased to 1015 hours yet Saturday is not an official school day anymore, so we have to have five very packed weekdays.”⁶

While most principals were critical of Yutori or Datsu-Yutori policies, one principal stipulated that “it is not the policy; it is the heart or self-esteem of each teacher that accounts for good effects on students.”

If countless voices were critical of governmental policies, is there no bright future in store for Japanese schools since policy in Japan is very top-down? In fact, due to the rampant use of “Yutori” and “Datsu-Yutori” in the public media including TV, newspaper, and magazines, other important aspects that were also included in the reform seem to have gone largely unnoticed by local teachers.

For instance, the Ad Hoc Committee of 1984-1987, which encouraged the principle of lifelong learning, noted that school education should nurture Jiko-kyouiku-ryoku, an individual’s own ability to educate him/herself (Tokunaga, 2012). To achieve this purpose, deregulation and decentralization policies such as forming small study groups during class lessons, introduction of PC usage in the classrooms, inviting volunteer teachers (who might not have a teaching license) from the local community, etc., have been introduced. Each of these innovations were observed at local junior schools in City X, and all were quite positively received by the schools since each principal *proudly* showed the researcher how their school has encouraged small class study methods, how they have connected with the local community by inviting volunteer assistants to the school, etc. However, none of these policies, small group study style, PC use, or inviting local volunteers, was understood as part of the deregulation and decentralization policy due presumably to overuse of the terms “Yutori” and “Datsu-Yutori” by the media. These simple yet practical and pragmatic approaches are widely disseminated in schools; therefore, overuse of terms such as “Yutori” and “Datsu-Yutori” might mask other relevant and beneficial policies that are also being implemented simultaneously.

⁶ Before Yutori policy, Japanese public schools were open for half days on Saturday.

Concluding remark

One striking fact that the author noticed is the imprecise usage of terms such as “Yutori” and “Datsu-Yutori” that have obscured understanding of policy. For instance, no principal realized that small group work or PC use in the class were part of the deregulation and decentralization policy that have taken place in line with Yutori and Datsu-Yutori. Further, when the author explained that current deregulation policy can be traced back to the Ad Hoc Committee set by Prime Minister Nakasone in the 1980s, they were all surprised and shocked. To put it differently, while the principals follow the teaching guidelines set forth by the City X committee of education, i.e. originally from MEXT, they do not have the opportunity to track how these policies have been formed or how they reach from MEXT to the classroom level.

On February 9, 2016, X prefecture released an official guideline on education—*Realization of No.1 quality education in Japan*. This guideline lists nine areas of education to be highlighted in the coming years. Early childhood care and education is also listed, which is a goal of the new worldwide education agenda, Education 2030. Even though a principal interviewed by the author serves as a member of the advisory committee of X prefectural educational committee, he did not know that this new prefectural guideline has been influenced by the dynamic of global educational trends, or post-EFA policy. Japanese schools do not interact with the outside world, and busy principals and teachers do not have the opportunity to follow in detail the dynamics of policy formulation and changes nor of the influences that affect them.

On the other hand, efforts to improve student learning, such as consolidating small-group study methods, PC use, etc., is well-received, and teachers are proud of these initiatives. In effect, teachers have been following the decentralization policy without realizing it.

While Japanese teachers indicate rather reluctant attitudes to parts of the decentralization policy, especially the newly implemented two-semester and school choice policies, other methods of decentralization that relate directly to lesson study (c.f. small group study, PC uses, inviting volunteer learning assistant to the class) are highly welcomed. This indicates that there is a gap between policy makers’ original intention and how these policies have been understood and implemented on the ground. Thus, smoothing the channels of communication between policy makers and administrators at the local level by clarifying policy objectives, implications, and outcomes would help enabling not only smooth policy dissemination but also understanding of real needs from the local school level, thereby benefitting education policy as a whole. However, regardless of any policy changes, the spirit of teachers trying to work hard for the betterment of students seems to always remain as a cultural preservation, and this spirit shall thrive in the hearts of teachers, thereby preserving the national identity at Japanese schools.

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